

Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project
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Kenji Lee
Jazz Saxophonist, Seattle

Interviewee: Kenji Lee

Interviewers: Madeline Warner

Subjects: COVID-19, pandemic, Detroit, Seattle, freelance, gigs, musician, city, community, music, musicians union, arts, stipend, government, music clubs, jazz clubs

Location: Seattle, Washington

Date: June 2020

Interview Length: 00:36:11

File Name: LeeKenji_2020_C19_Interview_Audio.m4a

MADELINE WARNER 00:00:02: Alright. My name is Madeline Warner, and I'm here with eminent jazz saxophonist and composer, Kenji Lee. We are in a studio apartment in Seattle, Washington, University District, and we're going to be talking about the coronavirus pandemic and its influence on the working musician. Before we get started, would you mind giving us a little background on your career as a musician up to this point before the pandemic started?

KENJI LEE 00:00:44: Yeah, hello. Thanks for having me. Like Madeline said, my name is Kenji Lee. I am a jazz saxophonist. I was born in Tokyo, Japan and raised in Southern California. I moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan to attend the University of Michigan for a Jazz Studies degree and then moved to Detroit, Michigan shortly afterwards. And then in September of 2019, I made the move to Seattle, Washington, where I currently reside. So, I perform. I'm a freelance saxophonist and composer. Up until this point, I've made my living doing that, and the coronavirus pandemic definitely put a hindrance on my own career, my own aspirations and it's been interesting to navigate the kind of a new (pause) just new territory as a musician, especially being relatively freshly removed from academia and new to being a full-time freelancer and new to being a full-time performing musician. It's been definitely—that's already been difficult to navigate and now the pandemic has definitely kind of set me back a few paces

that I wasn't anticipating. But, you know, I see I'm optimistic that things will return to some relative normality after—in several months to years.

MADELINE 00:02:31: Yeah. What did your—your version of a freelance musician look like before this all started?

KENJI 00:02:47: It was pretty multifaceted, especially when I was living in Detroit. Detroit's music economy is—it's really vibrant and healthy in that I think it's one of the only scenes that still exists that's, like, rooted in jazz music, which is what I do, or in blues music and Black American music art forms. There's a pretty sustainable flow of revenue being generated by the musicians that live there. So when I was living there, I was playing pretty often, like three or four nights a week, teaching a lot, playing outside of—as both playing casual corporate gigs and also playing performance venues. So playing in restaurants and playing in jazz clubs. And then also occasionally playing with—outside of jazz, doing recording work and playing with, rock musicians and—and other musicians that need—need a saxophone player, need a woodwind player. Yeah, and then, like I said, doing some private teaching and also some group teaching and kind of fitting in where I can, and having multiple streams of revenue at all times and trying to capitalize on—trying to find ways to make a living in every way. I basically—I was open to everything and still am open to everything and really—I tried to do it all, I guess. I don't know if that makes—if that is helpful (*laughs*).

MADELINE 00:04:32: Yeah. So now the whole economy is shut down, basically. Live music is no longer an option. What does your career look like now?

KENJI 00:04:52: When I moved from Detroit to Seattle, before the pandemic had even settled into place, I—my life took a drastic turn in that I—all of the networks and relationships that I built living in Detroit and all those kind of steady gigs and steady opportunities to perform with musicians—I set up to move to a new place and rebuild those kind of relationships and have relationships with people that allow me to perform more regularly and ultimately create a sustainable living. When I moved here, it was really on me to be out every single night, on me to meet musicians every night, go to other people's shows, just really—just be out and about and find ways to really make it happen as quickly as possible so that I could survive playing music. That being said, I worked a lot and I met a lot of musicians and I was playing a lot and I got to play with a lot of people and, really, even before I got here, got plugged into a lot of folks in Seattle that were able to hook me up with work and play.

That being said, I feel like the gig economy in Seattle—it was kind of pre-coronavirus, really heavily affected by the amount of change that the city has gone through in the last 20 years or so and just the boom of the tech industry and everything else so there already weren't very many places to play. The Tula's Jazz Club was like the last real jazz club in Seattle. It closed on September 30, so, 30 days after I arrived in Seattle. Whereas in Detroit, there's at least—maybe 10 clubs in the city that play jazz music seven nights a week so it was really kind of daunting to move to a new place where that infrastructure

didn't exist. But that being said, I picked up some work, some side work, just while I was making it happen for myself; to be like, "Okay, I'll work in the food industry or restaurant industry and serve," and do that just on the side in order to make ends meet and continue to make these connections and get teaching jobs. I was teaching at a middle school, teaching saxophone, and I was teaching privately, and I was teaching piano, and I was playing with pretty notable Seattle musicians and kind of just like making it all happen. And then the coronavirus set in. I was facing an uphill battle, just having moved to a new scene and a new community and then the coronavirus basically meant that I saw my gigs go out from under me, come out from under me before I saw my side work that I was doing, like in the restaurant game, come out from under me. So I saw all my gigs get canceled so those streams of revenue were gone.

Thankfully, I was working enough on my other jobs that I was able to work a little bit. Then I saw those gigs disappear, and so I had no stream of income for a while, until the government got together basically and got together a stimulus package and got together unemployment and so I've been collecting unemployment, which has kept me on my feet. But that being said, all the prospects that—basically what I needed to happen in a very quick time has started to take much longer. I recognize talking to other musicians in the community that a lot of the musicians that were here didn't see much financial—or not—I don't mean to say not much financial difference, but really were impacted less greatly than I feel like musicians in Detroit were because the musicians in Detroit were working in a gig-based economy where you go to the gig and you play the restaurant, and then you go to the club and you play—like, I knew musicians were like three or four nights for three or more gigs a day, like morning gigs, lunch gigs, and evening gigs; people who made their whole income and supported families playing music and teaching music, whereas here I see a lot of musicians who have already kind of set into the reality that Seattle doesn't really have the infrastructure to support jazz musicians. So a lot of people like work day jobs in the tech industry or they teach full time at a high school or college.

I don't know. I think there's—there's not a ton of musicians who I know here who totally—basically the coronavirus ruined their—their whole entirety of their career, but I do know some in that [inaudible] _____ here and it's like me in that we're all kind of in this place where it's like—like, what do you do when all the work that you have has just completely dissipated and you can't work from home, you can't make money, you can't sell records, you know what I mean? [inaudible] _____ The music economy was already bleak in any scene before the coronavirus, and then it was like taking the last, last glimmer of hope away from musicians to—especially ones who are—like myself, were moving to a new community and trying to establish themselves in a new scene. It's just really daunting to come back from this kind of thing.

But I'm just practicing and getting it together and I've decided to move back to Detroit after the—after this whole thing starts—the dust settles after the coronavirus because—because like I said, I just realized that—I have more of a safety net in some ways in Detroit. I have more of a network and I have more—there are more—I know that when the gigs come back, they'll come faster there because I was

already working three, four, or five times a week. I know teaching gigs will come 'cause I have a pretty strong connection in the teaching community. I understand that I can make that happen there, whereas, in Seattle—I don't know—I could stick around and keep working day jobs and continue to build after the dust settles after the pandemic, but, quite frankly, it's—I saw it as—there was an amount of time that I needed to break into the scene, and that's what I saw when I moved to Detroit, too, and once that amount of time—basically a year's time is what I needed and then the coronavirus made it so that I only had half a year to make that same thing happen. And then—my opinions on the musical aspects of the scenes are irrelevant as much as it is just trying to—what is relevant, rather, is trying to figure out what sustainability means for myself as a freelance musician in varying scenes, in Seattle or in Detroit, and what I want to be doing and what seems feasible for me to be doing—if that makes sense.

MADELINE 00:12:15: Yeah. That's your—you mentioned your aspirations have changed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Can you elaborate on that?

KENJI 00:12:33: Yeah, I think that it will—it put into perspective, as a young musician, particularly—I know a lot of older musicians who—they've experienced things like when the stock market crashed in 2008 or when those kinds of things happen, or 9/11, for instance. I know musicians who talk about what the scene was like during 9/11, or after 9/11. And it—those kind of catastrophic, cataclysmic events are very—they're eye opening in that it's like, "Wow, all my work can just disappear." And so, I—the way that my aspirations were prior to this pandemic were, "Okay, I'm gonna follow my role models and my mentors who are in their 30s and 40s and freelance musicians," and, "Okay, I'm gonna play a lot and network and gig and make my living playing and teaching privately."

And then, hopefully—I got asked to go on tour, a continental US tour several months ago, and that ended up not panning out but—those kind of opportunities for things that I've, [?worked on?] trying to set myself up to do more regularly and hopefully becoming a touring musician and using that and having that—having a revenue flow from that and living that kind of lifestyle and not to say that I don't think that's still a possible—plausible thing, but I'm starting to be more realistic in that—or, not even realistic, but I'm trying to keep my safety net open because I now realize, okay, those kind of major tours or even just local gigs and local restaurant gigs and students and all those things—they can kind of get pulled out from under you if something like this happens—if coronavirus happens or some some, I don't know, major event. Let's say—you think about this occasionally, but you don't think about it as being a real thing. I used to think in college—if I break my arm, how am I gonna make a living as a saxophone player if I can't play my instrument physically? And I was like, "Okay, that's fine, I'll never go skiing. (*laughs*) I won't break my arm because this is what I want to do and this is how I want to do it."

But in another way, this whole thing has proved to me that it doesn't matter how well you take care of yourself, or it doesn't matter how intentful you are about being a freelance performer. There's so much uncertainty and there's so much kind of instability in being a freelance performer that, for me, I'm now

seeking a more stable position. Whether that means teaching in public schools as a public school teacher—public school music teacher, or pursuing higher education and becoming a college teacher or—or even working outside of the music performance industry, working into some music administration or music management role, in addition to performing, because I know a lot of musicians who have been doing that. Like I said, in Seattle, that's kind of the norm and it makes sense because Seattle is far more expensive than Detroit and it's much less plausible to make a living in Detroit—or in Seattle than it is in Detroit as a freelance musician and just performing.

So, I don't want to say that the coronavirus pandemic has changed my aspirations. I still want to play with my heroes, I still want to make music, I still want to record records, and I still want to do all of those things. It's just that where my energy is being focused is more broad than it was before this. I don't like the term "Oh, it was a blessing in disguise" thing. Because it really—I'm fortunate to be able to seek—to have had this happen to me—and realize as a young musician is receiving unemployment, etc, I can just see this as a lesson to broaden my (pauses) outlook on making a living as a musician. But I know so many other musicians who have not only don't have that luxury but have families to feed and have had this happen in the past and it's just continually obliterating people that don't have the resources to—figure it out. This—the virus—for me, it's impacted me in a way that I feel is manageable, but I see too many—so many musicians where it seems—it's such a tragedy, it's the most kind, good-hearted people who found a way to make their living playing music and playing three days—three times a day, especially musicians in Detroit—feed their families and send their kids to college. I know people where it's—they're like, "Yeah, this is like—this is the worst part—time of my life. I can't continue to support my family."

And I have friends who are established musicians who are looking into other career paths, and they've accomplished more than I could ever imagine accomplishing, but they're just realizing—not even realizing, but it's it's been this (pauses) profound pressure to find something else to do to make your living because being a freelance performer and musician is—it really is so unstable and difficult.

MADLINE 00:18:46: Provided that, you know, second and third waves that are in the news don't keep us in this condition forever, how do you see the freelance (pauses) musician economy climbing out of this? What do you think is going to happen once we can all be together again?

KENJI 00:19:17: Yeah, I think that—for instance, I already see musicians performing again and—it's awesome that there are some venues that have the revenue or the backing to be able to present musicians and pay them on a live-stream basis or—I think you're going to increasingly start to see outdoor concert series that are socially distanced and everything. That being said, I think that it really puts musicians in a really tough spot because musicians need to make their living but a lot of these musicians are older or a lot of these musicians have significant others at home who are immunocompromised, and is playing this \$200 gig worth you potentially getting this virus and spreading it or getting this virus and and getting sick? I see a lot of musicians who, like myself—I've been called to play gigs here and—or even in

Michigan or thinking about when I'm going to gig or when I'm going to start playing and part of me is like, "Okay, I'm not ready to do that because it doesn't make sense. Because I'm still receiving unemployment, I'm still—it doesn't make sense to go back to work in a really—a really unsafe environment." Basically—just because the people who are hiring you don't feel like it's dangerous for you, they're willing to take that risk. They're willing to pay \$200 and you potentially become sick. I don't know that musicians—not all musicians are ready to take that. So, I think what you're going to see is you're gonna see musicians (pauses) start—some musicians start to play and some musicians start to refuse gigs. I think, over time, it's going to be—you need to make money, you need to survive so everyone's gonna start playing, regardless of the circumstances and regardless of how smart it is to be in these kind of— Because the thing about clubs and the thing about venues is they're all close contained spaces with a lot of people talking and drinking and eating and so musicians don't really have a choice but to be around a lot of people in close proximity with each other. So, I think the social distancing efforts are going to definitely be there from clubs and from venues and everything else, but I think that (pauses) it's going to be—it's going to be tough. It's going to be tough for musicians to make a living coming out of this because some people are just not going to be able to—be willing to sacrifice their health to make money doing music.

I think a lot of musicians are going to find a lot of administrative work or whatever, where you can work from home or even work in a more safe environment. On the contrary, I think that, of the musicians that I know—or of musicians who are going to be willing to come back and play—young musicians who aren't really exposing themselves to older people and don't feel—feel less (pauses)—they're just less terrified of the virus—or not even less terrified, but they're weighing the pros and cons and willing to play. I think the gigs are still not going to come back at a rate that's normal. So I think you're going to see a really interesting creative resurgence in music-making, where—for example, like in New York in the 1940s, when the cabaret card was introduced and musicians had to have a cabaret card to play in clubs. Those musicians who were incarcerated or had their cabaret card removed—they could still play music with each other and develop and work on music and do kind of like a speakeasy type—play in the speakeasy-type environments where it's like, "Okay, this is this isn't regulated, but you're—you're—you'll be able to perform and make music and play for people."

I think the other thing, too, is the last thing to come back as far as gigs are international touring musicians. I heard—like, the drummer in my band is the drummer for a major international jazz artist, who—he was saying that he sees himself not being able to continue on the circuit that he was before the pandemic, at least not for a while and therefore has to play local gigs and has to play these multiple-night stints at clubs close to him or clubs that are willing to have him. So I think it's gonna be really profound for musicians because I think that it'll be wild. You'll be at a house concert in somebody's basement or in somebody's backyard that's put on by the people because a lot of clubs are not going to be having music. So it's put on by the musicians and basically the people there, musicians, and people that are willing to go and see music and you're going to see—you're going to see John Clayton at this house—like outdoor house party gig, or you're going to see Mark Turner. You're going to

see these people that are your—are not typically in the localized communities because they're such international stars, but I think that people—musicians want to play music, and I think that when you have musicians that want to play music, and the only place to play is in the local economies and local scenes, you're going to see them playing, which—I'm excited for that. This kind of resurgence of this loft scene to be able to work with musicians that you typically don't get to work with because they're touring the world and everything else. But yeah, that's—yeah, that's me trying to really be optimistic about what the future looks like.

MADELINE 00:25:34: For a final point—this is an off the cuff question: What, given how devastating this pandemic has been to the musician community, especially freelancers—it revealed that there's very little infrastructure in the music industry to support things like this. From your experiences, what changes would you make at, I don't know, a national or state or whatever—if you could make any changes to the way that music and the arts are supported in the economy, what changes would you make?

KENJI 00:26:25: Totally. I think you're starting to see it a little bit as far as developing community relief funds and things like that for musicians. (pauses) I think that there just needs to be a vast restructuring of how our government allocates us resources, because you look at other governments in Europe, or in Germany, for instance. Germany has assistance for—financial assistance for musicians and creatives and artists, year round. They're—constantly have those resources available for people because they understand that it's—freelancing in 2020, in the modern age, isn't really feasible. That kind of livelihood isn't feasible without some government assistance. I think that (pauses) I don't really see that happening, at least in the near future, where the government's like, "Okay, all musicians get this—these grants, and get this money or whatever, or can apply for these things."

What I think is overwhelmingly a positive thing that's come out of this is musicians receive—are receiving unemployment for the first time ever, right? They're—the government is saying, "You are out of work. You can't make money and therefore we're going to pay you out of government money because you can't perform." I think that with musicians, there's this whole "If you're not gigging and you're not playing that's on you." I think that the restructuring of the economy that I would like to see is that we—musicians that unionize and they distribute wealth and income in a very practical way, meaning, "Okay, these musicians get this many gigs and these musicians get this many gigs and these musician get this this many gigs and these musicians who are left out of that will get this relief system," which is very—it's very non, non-capitalistic, so I don't—I don't think it'll work or make sense.

But even before the pandemic started—like this is one of the reasons that I speak so highly on Detroit is, the Detroit Musicians union [Detroit Federation of Musicians: AFM Local 5] formed up—rather than jazz musicians—within the AFM, the Detroit chapter set out a series of guidelines, saying "These, these are the minimums for the gigs that you can take. This is how much money you need to be expected to make at a restaurant gig. This is how much money you need to be expected to make at a club date."

Basically have all of these standards in place for how musicians should be treated and how they should be paid, which has never been the case because musicians—there's so little work in the grand scheme of things that people are taking whatever they can get. I know people who will make—play a \$6,000 gig with Taylor Swift and then the next week play for like \$45 at a bar. I think that if you could eliminate that for all musicians—if musicians could find a way to unionize and be like, "This is—that's unacceptable. You're not allowed to take those gigs," it would put musicians in less of a tight spot when these kind of things happen. I see that as a more feasible—reality and future going forward than giving some kind of stipend to all musicians like you see in other countries, or some kind of stimulus-check-type thing.

Yeah, so I see that. I also think that (pauses) at the end of the day, the future of music-making is going to be really—and performing music is going to be really interesting in that moving from Detroit to Seattle—I felt like it was time travel. It was like, Seattle is so post-gentrified, and so—there's such a disconnect between the past and the current, with the current city's inhabitants and residents, so many of which are not from Seattle and so many of which are—don't really care for the city itself, and preserving any kind of cultural, artistic heritage. So I think that you're gonna see that happening everywhere. You're gonna start to see huge businesses pay people to move to Detroit, or pay people to move to Chicago. It's basically—that's going to, in turn, change the way that those scenes function, and I think that what communities need is a way to not be obliterated by those big corporations. I saw that—I remember talking to this older bass player in Seattle, Phil Sparks. He's not older, but he's—I think in his late 50s, early 60s. He was telling me—he was like, "Yeah, when the tech thing came—"and he's been here for, like, 30 years. He said, "When the tech thing came into Seattle—these people all work in computers, and if you can't quantify what somebody does—if you can't put it in a new graph, and you can't put it into a computer and you can't say why that's gonna make you money or why that's going to be beneficial to you on an economic level, it became obsolete."

That's what happened with jazz in the scene. There was a lot of jazz being played and people really caring and listening to it because it was a culture and artistic—there was artistic value and merit to that kind of industry, but you have all these young, hyper-wealthy (pauses) "tech people," for lack of a better term, or like, "businesspeople" coming into communities and basically pulling the artistic merit away, or not really having considerations for the art—for art and culture that exists in a city. I think that we need to have some sort of community liaisons that are members of the music community that are [inaudible] _____ that will preserve music and preserve clubs and preserve "the scene," regardless of who moves into the city. I think about— Baker's Keyboard Lounge on the west side of Detroit is arguably the oldest standing jazz club in the world, right? And it's—why that club isn't a national historic monument and can't be torn down or bought, right? But, in addition, it should be every club in Detroit that's like that, these Black-owned businesses that have been there for a long time and cultivated so much art and culture that's synonymous with the city of Detroit. It can't—no amount of money should be able to remove those people and those businesses from the community. Their contribution to the community, it is—it's so priceless.

I think that if you could create a system and community liaison system where there was an arts—what do you call it? Like a head of arts kind of person. There's so many people that come to mind, like Marion Hayden in Detroit, or Rodney Whitaker, these people that are—historically really profoundly—not only strong artistic members of community but administratively have the means to—and have the understanding to be able to facilitate within a city government within a state government, and represent a faction of the people and, at the end of the day, represent the city in which they come from and the city in which their music comes from, from the the kind of threat of—of I don't want to say outsiders but the threat of—of gentrifiers and the threat, you know what I mean? Because I think that the removal of arts and culture from communities has a lot to do with gentrification, which is another conversation in and of itself., but I would like to see that. I would like to see cities really engaging with musicians and communities of artists to provide them not only relief, but security in—in their profession, in their scene, and community.

MADLINE 00:35:52: Wow. Thank you so much for your insight, Kenji.

KENJI 00:35:55: Thank you. Thanks for letting me talk a lot—too much.

MADLINE 00:35:58: No! Do I have your verbal consent to use this for my school project?

KENJI 00:36:05: I consent. I do.

MADLINE 00:36:07: Thank you.